

## **SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION TO MICHIGAN'S CONSERVATION DISTRICTS**

### **Conservation Districts and How They Operate**

A Conservation District is a governmental subdivision of this state (Districts are not considered non-profit organizations) organized by the people within the District boundaries under provisions of the *Soil Conservation District Law*, Public Act 297 of 1937, as amended. As such, it is a locally controlled resource management agency, created by concerned landowners and administered by a publicly elected board of directors. In 1994, the *Conservation District Law* was made part of the Compiled Environmental Code, Part 93, Public Act 451 of 1994, as amended. It was further amended by Public Act 463 of 1998 and Public Act 107 of 2002. MDA has been charged with oversight of the conservation districts.

The locally elected five-member board of directors makes all decisions regarding the District's programs and activities. The directors hire qualified staff to conduct and carry out the programs and activities that have been approved. These programs provide technical assistance, information, and education to assist people in the District to properly manage their natural resources. Currently Michigan has 80 Conservation Districts, which are generally organized along county boundaries.

### **The Purpose of Conservation Districts**

Major goals of a Conservation District and its programs are to:

- Reduce wind and water erosion, and control sedimentation in waters.
- Encourage conversion of all mismanaged land to a productive use.
- Encourage use of effective methods of surface and groundwater management.
- Facilitate landuse and landuse changes based on land capabilities and user goals.
- Enhance and protect the basic ability of land to produce food and fiber.
- Promote the maintenance of aesthetic values of land and its related resources.
- Control non-point sources of pollution to surface water, groundwater, and air.

### **How Conservation Districts are Funded**

District funding sources include state appropriations, county and other local governmental appropriations, and locally initiated and conducted fund raising activities. Conservation District directors are responsible for developing funding sources for the operation of the Conservation District and for the conduct of programs that focus on solving resource issues.

### **How Conservation District Programs are Conducted**

To effectively carry out its programs, a Conservation District should:

1. Establish a mission with a strategic/long-range plan and resource assessment for the District and a calendar of actions and annual goals leading to the accomplishment of the plan's overall goals;
2. Develop an annual program of activities and responsibilities based on the strategic/long-range plan; and
3. Utilize directors, District staff, technical personnel, and cooperating agencies in planning and implementing various phases of the District program.

### **How a Landuser Receives Assistance from Their District**

District assistance to a landuser may be in the form of a recommended solution to a specific problem or may involve development of a complete conservation plan for a given land area. To receive assistance:

1. A landuser requests assistance from the District.
2. District reviews the request, and assigns assistance based on its program plan and staff available in accordance with state and federal Civil Rights Laws.
3. Technical personnel review problems on site with the user.
4. Recommendations are developed with alternatives.
5. Landuser, in cooperation with technicians, select preferred recommendations and/or alternatives.
6. Landuser implements recommendations and technicians assist where needed.
7. District maintains contact with landuser to offer further assistance if and when needed.

Implementation of recommendations is voluntary on the part of the landuser who bears most or all of installation costs.

Through grants from several state and federal programs (e.g. Michigan Groundwater Stewardship Program or 319), Districts may be able to offer additional assistance to landusers in the form of cost-share for various conservation and environmental risk reducing activities.

### **Conservation Districts in Other States**

More than 3,000 locally governed Conservation Districts are organized and operate throughout the United States. These entities of government are charged with the responsibility of conducting programs to assist landusers in controlling erosion, managing water resources, and using land within its capabilities.